

Interview: Part 1 with Dr. Hilda Hidalgo

Date: May 9, 1987

Location: Rutgers University (Newark, New Jersey)

Interviewers: Griselda Cueto, Sandra Buso, Vivian Lanzot & Liz Rivera

Interviewer: What is your full name?

Hidalgo: My name is Hilda Hidalgo.

Interviewer: How old are you?

Hidalgo: Fifty-eight. [She was born in 1929.]

Interviewer: Where were you born?

Hidalgo: I was born in Puerto Rico.

Interviewer: What city in Puerto Rico?

Hidalgo: Rio Piedras.

Interviewer: How many years of schooling did you have in Puerto Rico? Until what grade did you complete?

Hidalgo: I finished college in Puerto Rico. I got my bachelors degree in Puerto Rico, University in Puerto Rico.

Interviewer: So, when did you decide to leave Puerto Rico, when you graduated college? Or had you found a job?

Hidalgo: No, I came to the States before I graduated from college for the first time. I came to the U.S. when I graduated from High School and had a semester in the University. After completing my first semester in the University I came to the U.S. I came to Philadelphia – and spent in Philadelphia a year and a half and then returned to Puerto Rico.

Interviewer: When did you come to Philadelphia for the first time?

Hidalgo: When I came to enter the convent.

Interviewer: You went into the convent? Tell me about that?

Hidalgo: Well, I – I had a, you know, I was very religious in P.R. I was raised catholic, and as I became an adolescent, I became more and more with the church and with a community of missionaries that worked with poor people in “los barrios” – Monasillo, Caymito, Cupey – went around with kids and I became very interested in that work. And that was

a religious community that was in P.R. They were called the “Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity.” But they were an American community, like many other of the religious communities in P.R. They were either Spanish, from Spain – coma “Las Hijas de la Caridad,” or they were Americans from other houses in the States. There was one Puerto Rican community of nuns in Puerto Rico, “Las Hermanas del Bien Pastor.” The rest were either American or Spaniard. And this order of missionary servant’s mother house was in Philadelphia. So, I really came up to enter the mother house in Philadelphia.

Interviewer: How did your parents feel about your dropping out of college to become a nun?

Hidalgo: Well, my mother wasn’t very happy. As a matter of fact, she didn’t think it was a very good idea and she cried and carried on. She said that she was going to die -- she didn’t die. Thank God. She wasn’t too happy. My father, who was, interestingly enough, the less religious one – my mother supposedly was a practicing catholic, my father was not. He was neither even raised a Catholic. As a matter of fact, he was a Protestant. And never really went to church or practiced religion. He said, “If this is what you want, I will support you.” This was right after World War II, there were no planes coming into the States, so I came by boat. And my father said: “Okay if this is what you want, I’ll take you.” And he came in the boat with me and brought me. And it was December. I had to enter, it was after the Holidays, and I had to enter the convent on February 15. It was interesting because I was late by a few days. I think I entered the end of February because I caught pneumonia. When I came, I landed in St. Vincent’s Hospital – the change of weather. So, I came by boat.

Interviewer: How old were you at the time?

Hidalgo: I was sixteen years old.

Interviewer: How was it when you first came here? To change from being a normal person to becoming a nun? How was it? [Laughter].

Hidalgo: Well, it was hard, in many ways. And in many ways it wasn’t so hard because I had a roof over my head. I didn’t have to worry about housing. I didn’t have to worry about food. I didn’t have to worry about being totally alone if something happened to me. So, in that sense it was good. In another sense, it was very lonely because when I finally entered the convent; my father went back to Puerto Rico. In the novitiate where I entered, there was only one other Puerto Rican. All the rest of the people – not only the class that I entered, but also all the community of nuns that lived there – were

Americans. So, there were only two Puerto Ricans. And we were not allowed to speak Spanish to one another. We weren't even allowed to speak much but we weren't allowed definitely to speak Spanish. There were a lot of restrictions then in the convent. I could only write home one a month. So, it was like total isolation from anything near.

Interviewer: You didn't know English when you came here, did you?

Hidalgo: Oh, I knew English. I went to school in Puerto Rico and I had graduated from High School in P.R. In P.R. you learn English in all the grades – since first grade. I remember my first grade, “See Spot, see Spot run. Run, run, Spot.”

Interviewer: Did you ever regret leaving Puerto Rico to become a nun?

Hidalgo: Oh, Boy! That's a big question. At times you regret it. At times you regret it. At times you – I mean, it depends. At that point, I was going home being a nun. So you know it was hard but that's what I wanted to be. That was my goal. I didn't like some of the things. I felt lonely at times. I wanted to – I don't know exactly what you mean by regretting.

Interviewer: Once you were in there, you probably said to yourself, “Oh, I wish I were home, I don't want to be here.”

Hidalgo: Oh, sure! I mean, I never said “I don't want to be here” because I am pig-headed. That's what I wanted to be. I mean I came here to become a nun and become a nun meant I had to live in Puerto Rico because of the kind of nun that I wanted to be. It meant, yes, you felt lonely, but I never said, “I'm going back.” Obviously, I stayed and became a nun.

Interviewer: How long did you stay in Philadelphia?

Hidalgo: A year and a half. I told you that before!

Interviewer: When you left Philadelphia, where did you go from there?

Hidalgo: They sent me back to Puerto Rico. And I went back by boat. Still you couldn't travel by plane. I went back by boat with three other nuns, four other nuns. The other Puerto Rican that was with me in the novitiate was also sent back to Puerto Rico. An Ecuadorian nun was sent back and an American nun. There were four of us who were going back to Puerto Rico. The Ecuadorian nun and myself were going to a mission in Coamo. And Juanita, the other Puerto Rican was going to a mission in Rio Piedras.

Interviewer: How long did you stay there?

Hidalgo: Where?

Interviewer: In Puerto Rico.

Hidalgo: I stayed – let me think back. I was in the convent a total of ten years. I stayed ten years more in P.R.

Interviewer: Ten years? In addition to the year and a half?

Hidalgo: Well, I wasn't in Puerto Rico then. The year and a half I was in Philadelphia, remember?

Interviewer: At the end of those ten years – of being in the mission ...

Hidalgo: I didn't say I was ten years in the mission.

Interviewer: Okay. During those ten years in Puerto Rico, were you on the mission?

Hidalgo: You mean what did I do once I went back? I was a nun. And I was sent to Coamo and I taught in Coamo in "El Colehio del Barbaner," in Coamo. For eight years, during the summers, I would go to Catholic University to take courses in Ponce and also on Saturdays during the school year I would go to Ponce to take courses. In about eight years, I completed what was called "normal" in Puerto Rico, was like Elementary School, a Community College. Normal to teach Elementary School, although, during those eight years, I taught in high school, too. After eight years, I left the convent and went back home.

Interviewer: Why?

Hidalgo: Well, I think you know that's a very complicated question. Why? I have to think why. I understand now. Maybe more – I think it was a period of growth during those eight years. I became a woman. I wasn't a little girl anymore! I think the convent was very good to me. It was a safe place to grow up, but there was no place once you grew up. So, it was really nothing, you know, dramatic. Don't think I fell in love with somebody and decided I was going to leave and get married and go with Prince Charming or anything like that. It was just a matter -- that, I realized I wanted to exercise my independence as an adult. That was very hard to do in the convent. I think that in retrospect, maybe one of the reasons that I went – remember, I went very young. I think that in my generation, there were a couple of options when you wanted to grow up: get pregnant – I obviously didn't want to do that. I was smart enough, or got sane enough not to go that route – and then get married; get married and then get pregnant – and obviously, I successfully avoided those two – or join the convent, really. Because in those days, in Puerto Rico, I didn't have the preparation, the economics means to independent living or anything like that. So, it was a way of leaving home, so that I

would become independent. But it was a different independence. But it put me on my own.

Interviewer: What did you do the last two years in Puerto Rico?

Hidalgo: Well, I went back to school and got a job, too, at the same time. So that's how I finished my Bachelors degree. I had two years I had to complete so that I could graduate. I completed my bachelor's degree in the University of Puerto Rico. I'd transferred to Catholic University in Ponce from University of Puerto Rico, where I had done a semester before I had gone into the convent. I had a job and graduated.

Interviewer: Upon graduation, what were your plans, at that time?

Hidalgo: I had been accepted and gotten a scholarship to study and got my Masters Degree in the Catholic University of America in Washington D.C. So, I had a scholarship and admittance in the Catholic University. So, I came back to the United States to study.

Interviewer: What particular study did you go into?

Hidalgo: I went into guidance and counseling and I graduated with a Masters in guidance and counseling.

Interviewer: How long were you in Washington?

Hidalgo: It took me a year and two summers to complete my Masters Degree in Washington and then I went back to Puerto Rico.

Interviewer: What did you do then?

Hidalgo: I went back. You see, school – the scholarship that I got was from the Girls Scouts of America and I have been working with them while I was completing my Masters. That's how I found out they gave out scholarships. And they thought that I had a lot of potential, so I applied and I got the scholarship. And the scholarship indicated that I had to work at least two years for Girls Scouts after I completed my degree. So, I went back to Puerto Rico and I worked for a year with the Girls Scouts of Puerto Rico.

Interviewer: And at the end of those two years?

Hidalgo: No. I worked one year. That's all I said, one year.

Interviewer: What did you do at the end of that year?

Hidalgo: Well, at the end of that year, it becomes obvious to me that certain things had happened to me, in my life in the States. When I went back to living at home with my mother and father, because that was what was expected from me, I had a good job. I had learned a lot and I really needed to be an independent person. I wanted my own house – my house, not my parent's. My parents were very good -- my mother loved me very much.

It's not that I had a miserable time home. They didn't beat me, you know. There was always food. And I lived very cheaply and very nice by them. But it was their home. It was their pictures on the walls. It was not my pictures and I found many things restrictive having been on my own. I also found limitations in how I could grow professionally. There was only one Girls Scout Counselor in Puerto Rico. While, in the States, there were over fifty counselors that you could, you know --. The person who headed the Girls Scouts in Puerto Rico was an institution, so she was going to be there until she died. If I wanted to move up in the organization, I had to move. So, I decided to come to the States, but I had to work with the Girls Scouts because I owed them a year. So, I decided to come to the States and look for a job with the Girls Scouts in the States.

Interviewer: In traveling back and forth, what kind of differences did you notice?

Hidalgo: What do you mean?

Interviewer: I mean between Puerto Rico and the United States?

Hidalgo: Well, I think that I mentioned the differences. Some of them were obvious. I was [of] a different culture and language. But also, many of the differences were for me in life and my lifestyle. The differences I was noticing more had to do with differences that had to do with me, how I was getting on in my lifetime.

Interviewer: While you were speaking, you kept talking about your parents and yourself. Do you have any brothers and sisters?

Hidalgo: I have two sisters. I have two sisters that are younger than I am.

Interviewer: How did they feel about you doing all this traveling? Were you close?

Hidalgo: Well, I came from a family that traveling – I mean my mother and my father had traveled – had been in the States and in Europe. My mother was a teacher in Puerto Rico. My second sister, as a matter of fact, had come and studied in Boston University – and had even gone to Germany to study. So, in that sense, my traveling was not something unusual in my family.

Interviewer: When did you decide to come to New Jersey?

Hidalgo: As I said, I had to get a job in the States because of the business that I told you about before. It had to be in Girls Scouts. So, I said, okay. Remember I had lived in Washington. I had contacts in Washington. I had contacts in Philadelphia because I had been in the convent there. And I had still some friends there who were nuns there, who were friendly to me even if I was not a nun anymore. Of course, every Puerto

Rican knew about New York. So, I took a map and I said that I want to be between Washington D.C. and New York. So, I can go back often to Puerto Rico, I can see my family, and my family can come see me. I set those boundaries between Washington and New York City. I was going to try to get a job some place in there. The National Headquarters of Girls Scouts was in New York City. So, they were setting up interviews for me – when I came I had lined up by them, three interviews. One was in Yonkers, New York and I went. One was in Syracuse, New York, which I never went. It seemed to be the end of the world. And one was in New Jersey – in Orange, New Jersey. There were some things that were changing in Girls Scouts at the time. They were consolidating from small councils and what had been different councils had become one big council for Essex County. The central offices were in Orange: Main Street in Orange. That's how I met Maria [?]. In Orange, they were looking for a District Director – that's a professional job – for Newark. The Newark population was beginning to change in terms; it was beginning to be black – not so much Puerto Ricans. Only here in New Street, where there are a lot of Puerto Ricans. I had done a project with the Girls Scouts working with kids from “La Perla” and the housing projects in Puerto Rico the year I had come back. I came for an interview. I liked very much the Executive Director, who became one of my very good friends and one of the best role models I ever had, professional role model. She gave me the job and I liked the job and I took the job. When I took the job to be District Director in Newark, my office was on Rutgers Street. Right across [from] the old building was Rutgers University – I could see the people study – which is now, I think -- Science High. There were old labs from Rutgers. My office was in a little building, which is still there behind the parking lot of the Y.W.C.A. and Y.M.C.A. and some buildings of Rutgers. It was the “Fraternal Order of Eagles” building. The wife of the guy who was the Executive of the Fraternal Order of Eagles was a member of the board of Girl Scouts. So, the second floor of that building, since they were not using it, was given for the offices of the District Directors of Newark. There were two of us. The other woman was District Director, Marian Hubert, an American, and myself. I was the only Puerto Rican or Spanish-speaking staff member in that council, in the professional staff and the clerical staff.

Interviewer: Did you experience a lot of discrimination?

Hidalgo: Yes. Not so much – not from the staff. The Executive Director, her name was Dolores Gilbert, was of Mexican descent, from California. She didn't speak Spanish – she had

been born and raised in the States. She was an extraordinary human being. Besides being a hard working executive, she was a social worker, too. And it was not fair, but I couldn't get an apartment in Newark. They were very helpful and gave me addresses of where to get apartments. One of the places that they recommended, were some apartments that were owned by Prudential in the Ironbound section of Newark. And I went and I applied but they didn't rent to Puerto Ricans. The next apartments that I tried were the [?] apartments and they wouldn't rent to Puerto Ricans. So, what I had to do was get one of my friends, who was a nun in Philadelphia, pay and sign the lease. She rented the apartment and I lived there. And under her name, she was Irish-American – they rented to her. And I remember, I had a professional job and I could put two months security rent, but she signed the lease. And that's how I got my first apartment in Newark.

Interviewer: Why did you choose to live in Newark?

Hidalgo: Because, I was working in Newark – I was working here at Rutgers Street.

Interviewer: Did you ever experience any racist attacks, beside, you know?

Hidalgo: I had previously – in Texas, I had an experience: a very traumatic experience – when I had come to study at Catholic University – of having been refused service in a restaurant. But that's another story. I don't know if you want to hear about that. But the year that I was talking about was 1960. In 1960, it was the beginning of the Civil Rights Revolution. With the experience that I'd had in 1958 in Texas, I was very much committed. And plus, the experience I'd had renting an apartment here. I was also working in the first housing projects in Newark. They were all Black. So, I became very actively involved in the Civil Rights Movement and everyone was mostly Black. I was mostly working with the Black community.

Interviewer: So, a lot of racism/discrimination gave you a lot of motivation?

Hidalgo: It gave me a lot of anger – you know and anger provided motivation.

Interviewer: You were saying that you – when you went back to the U.S. that you made your Masters in guidance and counseling. What motivated you to do that? Leaving a convent and going into guidance?

Hidalgo: Well, obviously I was interested in education. I was interested in helping people. I had a B.A. in education so when I applied; I had applied to the education department in C.U. It was – that the department had several things that you could major in: you could major in elementary education (also, remember, I was working in the Girls Scouts and I had to

go back) you could major in early childhood education; in secondary education and graduate education. Those were the three departments of education and psychology, guidance and counseling. It seemed the most akin to the things I was going to be doing and working with young people in the Girl Scouts. One thing I didn't know, that it was hard to get into the University, I got accepted into that University that I applied. I really didn't know that being Puerto Rican would hinder you being accepted to a University.

[Interview #1, Side B]

Interviewer: Why would it be easier being accepted if you were born in Puerto Rico?

Hidalgo: Well, obviously, First of all, I speak well, I graduated Magna Cum Laude, so I had very good grades. So, obviously I was able to get into the University of P.R., where I didn't pay tuition. I came from a middle-class family; I didn't come from a poor family. My mother was a teacher. My father had a white-collar job. But, still in Puerto Rico tuition was sixty dollars. I could live and work at the university, but I never paid tuition. If you kept a certain grade point average, tuition was free. So, the whole idea, quite honestly, to me, that you could not study if you wanted to study was -- It never occurred to me that some people who wanted to study and who had the intelligence to study, would be systematically excluded from that process. It was easy to accept me; I was not Puerto Rican from here. My application probably looked like any other application, in many respects. Plus, you know, I had a scholarship to come here that the Girls Scouts had given me. The Girl Scouts is a good organization, but I learned a lot of things through my experiences. The Girl Scouts were an institution that was brought to Puerto Rico to Americanize people: an assimilationist organization. They did a lot of good things, you know, but I think -- it was bad. I understood, as I became very much aware of being a Puerto Rican politically, emotionally, I made mistakes. And I learned a lot from my experiences of how things have worked out or not worked out for me at any given time, in light of those insights.

Interviewer: After you completed that one year that was required for you to complete working in the Girl Scouts, did you leave the Girl Scouts?

Hidalgo: No, I stayed -- I stayed, obviously seven years with the Girl Scouts. Because I became very much involved in Newark, I began to understand racial dynamics in the city. My job was to provide Girl Scouts, which I say as a way of developing leadership, to the minority population. Newark was becoming increasingly a minority city. As a matter of fact, I developed a special program for minorities and reformed and changed a lot of

the Girl Scout programs to the housing projects in Newark. I developed Black leadership, instituted leadership programs for their people. I integrated what was mostly a white racist middle-class organization. That's how it was operated in the Girls Scouts. The council had a camp in Blairstown, N.J., which I directed. Black kids from Newark, when I became director there – and Dolores was new – the Black kids in Newark were allowed in the camp only two weeks, in which then they would hire a black counselor and I'm quoting now from minutes I found of the camp's board of director one year: "during the last two weeks, they would admit two units (they didn't want to call them Black) of Negro kids from Newark. And they would have a Negro counselor to braid and comb the Negro's hair." And in those same minutes of the council, of the Board of Director of these white ladies from Short Hills and Summit and South Orange and Bloomfield, and Bellville, of the council, spent about five pages of the minutes deciding whether for two weeks the Negro girls would be allowed a Negro counselor – swear to God – whether they would allow "black swans and white swans to swim in Louise Lake, which was in the property." It was that mad. Dolores became determined that I would get a grant. And I hired a team of two blacks. One was the wife of a guy who had been in an organization for Jews in New York – and two Black women and one Jewish woman, who is one of the biggest feminists that I know. She was quite well known, [Janet or Janice Goodman ?]. She's a lawyer now. Those three women and myself, as head of the team, took on special projects to change Girl Scouting in Newark and make it available to minorities. I was successful to some degree. I got into trouble once in a leadership training course that I was giving to these women. I had, what they reported to the executive director – who called me laughingly, the audacity to put the word "black" on the board, the word "black." It was about racial relationships and because I used the word "black" and because I presented the problems. It was like Byzantine times when the one who presents the problem gets beheaded – that I was inciting to riot, being an agitator, creating all this conflict. I had a hundred percent support from the Executive Director. These were the days then. I also became involved in a lot of community things.

Interviewer: Okay, Hilda, you mentioned that you had a traumatic experience when you first came to Texas. Would you mind talking about that?

Hidalgo: I don't mind talking, but I know you're pressed for time, but I will tell it very briefly. That summer and the previous summer I had directed a project for the Girls Scouts that

I had already told you about, of taking girls from La Perla, from El [?], one that I forget what it's called ... El [?]. That was in Puerto Tierra. I had gone in and recruited these kids from these housing projects. And we brought them for a whole summer to Girl Scouts Camp. It was a project partially sponsored by Dona Fela and by the Girl Scouts of the U.S.A., who brought kids from all the States. That was my staff: young adult Girl Scouts and two adult Rican senior scouts when I was directing that project. It was after I finished that project that I was coming to see [?]. One of the adult leaders who was from Texas invited me and said, "You know, your English needs some improvement." And I had had the English district in Puerto Rico, St. Thomas, St. Croix and the Caribbean. And I had been a whole year in Philadelphia and I had been in an American community, where they spoke English all the time because it was an American community. So, I thought my English was pretty good. I mean, by Puerto Rican standards, I speak pretty good English and I could converse fairly well. She said: "your English needs a bit of improving." Now, not knowing anything, who the hell would go to Texas to learn English? But, being naïve and she being a nice person that invited me before I entered the University to come and spend time with her, it sounded like a good deal. I liked her, so I visited her. She lived in Abilene, Texas. That's really a cowboy town, but she was a friend. In fact, we had met in New York. She came to New York and we went to the theater. I saw Broadway, for the first time. I stayed in a prostitute hotel because the name was St. Francis. I didn't know. It sounded like the saint. Later, I found out what it was because I had a cousin that was a mayor. When he got word from my father that I was staying at the St. Francis, he came in full regalia and told me where I was. I found it in the yellow pages; I thought St. Francis was a gentle saint. Anyway, we stayed there. I saw my first Broadway show and I went to the Planetarium and I went to the Museum of Natural History and the Art Museum, where I had a great time. It was fantastic. I ate my first cheese cake at Lindy's. I did a lot of things. Anyway, and then we went to Texas. And one day in a town – Big Springs, Texas – she was going to give a talk to a group of Lion or Rotary Club about the experience in Puerto Rico with the "Porects." And I said: "I didn't want to go and hear it all. I directed it all. I'm going to walk around. You make your presentation and when you are finished, we'll leave." I went on my own, walked around and I got thirsty. It was around noon and I went to ask for a Coca-Cola – I didn't even know about Pepsi – and the guy showed me a sign that said: No Mexicans.

No Niggers. No Bitches. I didn't even know what a bitch was. And then all of a sudden, by those insights that you get that are not rational, but emotional, I realized that I was all three. It's an indescribable experience. I won't even try to describe it. It's confusing, but the primary emotion was that for the first time, I knew what the word mad means. It was the raging anger that explodes within you, the adrenaline keeps going. You become really mad and I think the guy sensed it. I had a twenty-dollar bill and he gave me a Coca-Cola and I took the bottle and I broke it. I smashed it and I cut my fingers. I have scars, still. It's a force that I cannot imagine because it was one of those full bottles of Coca-Cola – those thick ones. I don't think they have them anymore. It was not an easy thing to do. I don't know how I did it. And I think that I left the money there because I had it in my hands to pay for it. My friend found me three hours later. I was scared. I was full of blood because really, I should have had stitches. She kept asking me what happened. I was full of blood, disoriented – I looked like a crazy woman. And I kept saying, "I've got to get out of here." That was all I was saying. My friend never knew what happened -- until ten years later, at a convention when I was finally able to tell her about this experience. It was too traumatic – I had never encountered anything like it. I got on a Greyhound bus and I didn't stop until I got to Washington. I had a friend in Washington, D.C. from Puerto Rico. Peg had called Laura when she put me on the bus and said, "I don't know what happened." All she could say was that I acted crazy and was full of blood. She had put a handkerchief on my hand – I wouldn't even let her bandage it. She had no idea what happened. She had to put me on this bus. Laura had come in and had met every Greyhound bus that was coming from the South until I finally got off. I think it took three days on that bus, to travel from Big Springs to Washington. I know it was at least three nights. They would stop, all the people would get off. I don't think I even went to the bathroom. Anyway, when my friend saw me, she put her arms around me and took me to her home, took my clothes off me, put me in a warm bath with Epsom salts, bathed me and put me to bed. I think I slept for about 24 hours. Then I was going to see [?] but I put that away. For years I couldn't talk about it.

Interviewer: That was very traumatic. And your hand? That was never taken care of?

Hidalgo: When I got in – being that the bleeding was dry. That's why the scars are so big, because stitches were never taken.

Interview: Part 2 with Dr. Hilda Hidalgo

Date: May 4, 1987

Location: Rutgers University (Newark, New Jersey)

Interviewer: Vivian Rubianes

Rubianes: When we last left off – as far as your chronological history, we left off in the early 1960's when you were working with the Girls Scouts as a district director.

Hidalgo: Right.

Rubianes: Okay, at the time, you said you were working with other organizations. I'd just like you to elaborate a little bit on that. What other organizations were you with?

Hidalgo: Okay, at that point, I became involved in a couple of Civil Rights Organizations: C.O.R.E being one, and America for Democratic Action, which was very much involved with the Civil Rights Movement, also in a coalition – a progressive coalition of whites and blacks, and very few Hispanics, that was working around issues of police brutality in Newark and Civil Rights issues. I think that the organization was called New Frontier Democrat and it was, ah, one leaders of the organizing effort at that point, was George Richardson, who was a black assemblyman, in the State Legislature and Kirvin, Robert Kirvin and a couple of other people. There was an issue in which a police officer killed two people. He shot them in Orchard Street, here in Newark – and the issue of police abusive power was very much -- In the early [19] 60s and I even remember the policeman involved because he is now a councilman in the city of Newark. The policeman involved in that was Martinez, who is the councilman. And we had a couple of rallies and meetings. Also, around the same time, and I don't remember exact dates, the [Rutgers] Law School was beginning to be built, which was Ackerman Hall. And I used to go and picket at 5:00 in the morning. At about five to eight, before we went to work, on the construction site because there were no minority people in the unions. It was a struggle with the construction unions at that point in time. Shortly after that, also, there was another important incident, I can't recall the exact date – it's all in that same period of time, that black students took over the building here in one of the buildings in Rutgers, and I was involved with negotiating from the outside

with the University officials. At that time it was Malcolm Talbot, who was Vice President in charge of Newark; there was no Office of the Provost then.

Rubianes: You were negotiating on behalf of the school or on behalf of the students?

Hidalgo: On behalf of the students that had taken over the building. I was not working. When that happened, I think I had already left the Girl Scouts. Yes, I was working for Child Service Association in Newark.

Rubianes: And this is – you said, the last time you worked for the Girl Scouts for seven years – so this is around 1967?

Hidalgo: Yes.

Rubianes: Child Service Organization.

Hidalgo: Right.

Rubianes: Okay, that was my next question. What did you do when you left the Girls Scouts? When did your involvement with A.S.P.I.R.A. and F.O.C.U.S. come into the picture, was that later?

Hidalgo: ASPIRA, I became involved with ASPIRA in 1967, I believe it was. I was involved in ASPIRA when it started, right in the beginning of the year, when it was founded. A group of – I believe they were about 13 of us, Maria Blake, Sara Saragoza, Gloria Del Toro, Maria Gonzalez, Percy Miranda. I think that was the initial group [that] became involved. Somebody from ASPIRA in New York contacted us. We started meeting with them to explore the possibility of opening an ASPIRA in New Jersey and eventually, it happened. After about a year of conversation and negotiating, ASPIRA of New Jersey was founded and I became the President and was the President of the Board for the next five years. The first Executive Director that we got was Juan Rosario, who is now the Executive Director of ASPIRA – National ASPIRA, and who for a while, many years later, worked at the Board of Education in Newark as Assistant Superintendent. So that was the initial ASPIRA.

Rubianes: Where there many problems involved in organizing it in New Jersey?

Hidalgo: Well, you know, if you were going to, the main problem was money! Because you had to hire a professional staff to staff ASPIRA. The interest and the volunteer effort – that's what I was involved in – was there. A grant from Ford Foundation made it possible and then we started from then on, you know, additional fundraising efforts, up to this day, are still one of ASPIRA's problems.

Rubianes: Are you still actively involved in ASPIRA?

Hidalgo: Well, not as much. I'm still a member, but I'm not on the Board. I haven't been on the Board for quite a while.

Rubianes: I believe you were involved with FOCUS also. Where you at any point?

Hidalgo: No, I was involved with, ah, The United Community Corporation, I was secretary of the Board. The United Community Corporation was the anti-poverty agent in the War on Poverty. The President of that Board was Dr, William Heckert, who was the Dean of the Law School. At the time, that was before the Green Amendment and the Green Amendment reduced the maximal physical participation of community people. But I was on board as secretary when the Board was more representative of the community. I was the Board Secretary. It was a grant the United Community Corporation distributed, in addition to having some services themselves distributed, funds for other organizations and while I was on the Board was that the money for FOCUS was voted on.

Rubianes: You said, um, when did represent the community. It doesn't now, you think?

Hidalgo: Well, after a while the Green Amendment was passed in Congress. The Green Amendment shifted the balance of power from community people to the local government, to municipal government – the mayor having much more seats on the board than the community, so that the composition of the board began to change. I was not on the Board, but FOCUS was a spin-off from the United Community Corporation.

Rubianes: Okay, do you think organizations such as ASPIRA and FOCUS, later, were more beneficial to the community, than say, Girls Scouts were when you were involved with them?

Hidalgo: Well, I think that they were more directly addressing some of the problems of the Hispanic Community and were clearly Hispanic Organizations. The Girls Scouts was not a Hispanic Organization. These two were clearly Hispanic Organizations.

Rubianes: Last time you called them “white-racist organizations.” [Both Laugh]
Why did you finally leave the Girl Scouts in 1967?

Hidalgo: I left them because I got another job. Also, because there were some changes beginning to happen. I felt that I had been able to accomplish as much changes in the Girl Scouts by having established the special programs in Newark – tearing down some of the racial barriers, getting some real ground-breaking work done. And the opportunity to work in something like that again was beginning to surface as something new in the community, which was child abuse and child neglect. I got then the opportunity, a job that was

offered to me by Leontine Young, who was the Director of Child Services Association, and one of the pioneers in the field of child welfare – child neglect and abuse. Before D.Y.F.U.S. the administration was passed for the state government to take care of that. And this was a private agency who [which] worked exclusively with poor people – mostly in Newark. But in Essex County, with the issue of child neglect and child abuse. And I was offered an opportunity to work there and as I said, it was ground-breaking.

Rubianes: In what capacity did you work there?

Hidalgo: I started as a case-worker and after a year I became the Director of group work for the agency. The agency had many services and one of the services we provided was tutoring services for the kids who were referred to us and they were all kids from Newark, minority kids. We ran a tutoring service, we ran a lot of recreational clubs and we ran parents groups and summer camps for kids. I directed all those activities. I had staff under me at work.

Rubianes: I suppose their camp differed a lot from Girl Scouts camps. [Laughter]

Hidalgo: Oh yes, this was a day camp. The agency was located on Broadway, right next to what was then the Boys Essex Catholic High School, right behind Roberto Clemente (Summer Avenue) School.

Rubianes: How long did you stay there?

Hidalgo: I stayed there until I came to the University. It was 5 or 6 years.

Rubianes: How did you come to the University?

Hidalgo: Okay, at that point I was still involved in a lot of the Civil Rights activities that I mentioned, including taking over the United Community Corp. I was no longer on the Board and the Green Amendment had taken place, and a group of Hispanics and I played a leadership roles and took over of the building at 3 o'clock in the morning. They met at my house the night before at 7 o'clock. Everybody was there. We had dinner over at my house, a group of about 30 – 40, including very young people of the community. At around 3 o'clock in the morning we went over to take over the building. It was a week after I had major surgery. I was on leave, sick leave, for cancer – we took over the building. I acted as speaker for the group, negotiating. We achieved settlement in a day. So, I was still very much involved in community affairs.

Rubianes: What was the purpose of that demonstration?

Hidalgo: Oh, because they were not giving the UCC enough funding for Hispanic activities as part of the community corporation in either [the] programs run by the UCC itself or the

satellites that the UCC supported. At that point a new college for Rutgers University was being established. The rebellions that happened in Newark -- you know that is a very important part -- we're talking about the summer rebellion and I have been active in that. I served as a Marshall in the Central Ward in trying to keep peace with the National Guard and everything, all over the place. As a result of that, I think Rutgers University began to make a response to minority communities. Rutgers had become the University of the State of New Jersey. Rutgers was before, a private institution and has changed over, and there was this new college opened, Livingston College, that was supposed to have a special mission in deference to [the] minority population, and it was to be innovative. I was asked by a group of Hispanics to apply for a position because there were very few Hispanics that had the academic credentials that I have and that mainly consisted of two masters: one in guidance and counseling, and one in social work. At that point, I didn't have my doctorate then, and so they asked me to apply and I said I wasn't interested. I was happy with what I was doing in Child Services. They said, at least send in a resume because we have to show that we have some people that are qualified for University positions. And I didn't send a resume for teaching, I sent my resume to direct their Guidance Center, for which I was then qualified, having a guidance Master.

I went for an interview, and I was interviewed by the Dean of Students for the whole University. As part of the interview, I was also interviewed by the Dean of the College, in the interim, by other people who were there already associated with the college. I think Edwards, who is the Vice President of the University, interviewed me. As I said, I was supposedly being considered for the job of guidance in the Student Center. I was asked by these people a couple of questions, you know, how you will approach teaching certain things about urban studies, and I just gave, you know, common sense opinions. When a few days later, instead of getting an offer for the Guidance Center, I got an offer for Associate Professor for the Urban Studies Department. I turned it down and the person in charge of the Urban Studies Dept., Dr. Larry Mann, thought that the reason I turned it down was the salary that they offered me and he called my boss, Dr. L. Young at Child Service to ask her how much they were paying me. I had told her, because I had no intention of changing jobs. So, he called her and asked her how much they were paying me and she asked why and he told her why. So, she said don't worry about it, she will call you in a little while and you know she'll take the job. She called

me to her office and when I walked in she told me I was fired and I said: “But why? What have I done?” And she laughed and she said: “If you are dumb enough not to quit, you know I’m going to fire you.” I said: “I don’t know what you are talking about?” And she said she heard, you know. She told me about the college. Actually, they had offered me \$5,000 more than I was making a Child Services. And she said, you know, it’s a good opportunity and you should take it. It’s an opportunity that comes, maybe, once in a lifetime and I appreciate your loyalty and wanting to stay here, but I think it’s good for you and you should take it. If you don’t I’ll fire you and you’ll have to take it. So, I talked to her for a while and I called back and I said I will accept it, only as an Assistant and for less money.

Rubianes: Why the difference?

Hidalgo: Well, something in my guts told me that they were offering me an Associate Professorship as a token and I didn’t want to go as a second class citizen. So, I said I would accept what I thought was appropriate rank for my qualifications.

Rubianes: What was his response?

Hidalgo: Assistant. And they said we had never had, and actually he put it in writing, they had never gotten someone who demoted themselves and affected a reduction in salary. But I said I wanted an opportunity to go part-time and get my doctorate.

Rubianes: Did he understand the purpose behind your actions?

Hidalgo: Yes. I explained that I wanted that opportunity, so he said, okay, no problem. And that was agreed upon. That’s how I came to Rutgers. Within a year and a half, I was made Head of the Department at the Union Graduate School [which] gave me the opportunity to do my residency during the summer months. Eventually, I was promoted to full [professor] and I stayed there for 8 years, at Livingston. And then, Livingston was beginning to change, from a very progressive, innovative kind of approach – I did some innovations there. I was, for 6 years, Chair of the Department and also chaired the section for Urban Studies for the whole University. And I did a lot of innovative things – started the Bachelor in Social Work Programs as part of the Urban Studies Curriculum, and I felt at that point that I had done as much innovations as the University could take. The institution was becoming more conservative, so I decided that maybe I should come back and be closer to where the laboratory and things that interested me where because I was commuting in reverse – I lived in Newark and would be going to New Brunswick all day, practically spending all night there.

Rubianes: And this was back in the early [19] 70s?

Hidalgo: Yes. I then asked for a transfer to the Newark Campus for Urban Studies here and I got it.

Rubianes: How was the campus here at the time? Did it compare with the Livingston Campus, at all?

Hidalgo: It was being compared to the Livingston Campus. While Livingston was becoming more conservative, I felt I was in Urban Studies in Newark, at least I could be doing outside of the University some of the things that I am interested in. I could do more at the University, at least I could be closer to the things -- so that's the reason that I asked for the transfer to Newark, and that's how I got here. After two years with Urban Studies, I got the idea for the new experimental MSW program and that's where we are today.

Rubianes: How is the progress?

Hidalgo: The program in itself has ended and now we are developing a Masters in Public Administration for Hispanics.

Rubianes: You entered the convent when you were sixteen, do you consider yourself religious?

Hidalgo: No, and it depends what you call religious. I answered very quickly. I consider myself a very ethical person, a moral person. I am not concerned with organized religion. I'm not a church-goer. I am not even sure that I believe in a traditional God. I believe in a sense of principles, ethical principles that guide my actions.

Rubianes: Has it been disillusionment, or enlightenment, how would you characterize it?

Hidalgo: A little bit of each. A little bit of disillusionment in organized religion. And a little bit of enlightenment in the joys of discovering.

Rubianes: I suppose it's all interwoven with your community activities?

Hidalgo: Yes.

Rubianes: As far as political leanings, would you consider yourself a liberal or a conservative?

Hidalgo: A radical.

Rubianes: Why radical?

Hidalgo: A radical that often has to vote liberal because there are not enough options.

Rubianes: Are you a regular voter then?

Hidalgo: Oh, yes!

Rubianes: Would you consider yourself a feminist?

Hidalgo: Oh, definitely!

Rubianes: This must be far and removed from anything you were reared with, from anything you mother has believed in. If you were to explain your mother right now --

Hidalgo: Well, it isn't. In some of my actions, I guess, I'm very radical – especially my lifestyle. I'm a Lesbian Feminist. In terms of ... in many things I am very conservative. People think, "Oh my God, she's a lesbian!" What does that mean for the general part? But in many ways, I'm very, very conservative. I have established a relationship with another woman. We have been together in a monogamous relation [ship] for 25 years. That is very conservative. My mother, before she died and my father met my lover and accepted it. My whole family accepted this. She's as much a member of my family as I am of hers. The most traditional kind – so, in that sense, I'm very traditional. I'm coming from a family ... I mean my mother – you asked me specifically about my mother. My grandmother, who lived with us all my life, became a widow with eleven children, when the oldest was something like 17 or 18 years old and the youngest was still in the womb. And she became the head of the family with all these children and all of the women – there were 5 women—she gave an education to. So, her life was very unusual. You know, one of my aunts became a "comadrona." What is that in English? Midwife. One was a seamstress – a professional seamstress, and the youngest ones were teachers. My mother was the youngest. And my mother worked all her life. So, she's not very traditional in that sense. She went out to work and was actively involved in a lot of the activities of the community.

[Interview 2, Side B]

We were in the recreation [recess] with the patients in the "manicomio" [a mental health facility] in Rio Piedras. [When we were] very little she would take us to the activities in the "manicomio." We interacted with the patients so that she traveled. Her father traveled. She went to Europe a couple of times. So, in that sense, I think it was very ... that since I was a little girl, I was going to school and having a career, even if I was programmed to get married.

Rubianes: Did you realize at that time that it was an unusual rearing for a girl in Puerto Rico?

Hidalgo: I feel, really, that it is a very interesting question because, I guess in many ways, it was also very traditional. We didn't go out alone – [without] my mother, so, that's no, I didn't realize it was different. You know, I went to school, other people – as a matter of fact, the other people I went to school with, we – it was a school – I went to school in "La Modelo." It was an experimental school for the University of Puerto Rico. I went

to school with the same kids from Kindergarten to four years of High School. And I believe that in my class, all of us eventually became medical doctors or teachers.

Rubianes: Quite an education!

Hidalgo: It was a very good school. It was a free school. You didn't have to pay tuition. To get in at that time, most kids in the school were sons and daughters of University professors. So, in that sense, it was sort of an elitist school. In that sense, everyone was very much oriented.

Rubianes: Did a lot of children from that background follow a similar route as you? I mean, coming to the United States and helping the community, or just coming to the U.S.?

Hidalgo: One of my classmates, by the way, I met many years later, when I was involved with ASPIRA. She became a board member of ASPIRA. I think she came to school here and she married a very prominent Republican of the Bates family. She became a board member of ASPIRA when I was president. She stayed in for a while. Her maiden name was Joan Dexter-Brown. When I met her, this was many years after I had entered the convent, we were reminiscing a lot about the people we went to school with. I think all the boys became M.D.s or dentists. And all the women – some became doctors. I was the last one to get a Doctorate because of the convent.

Rubianes: You took a round-about way. Did they mostly stay on the island [Puerto Rico]?

Hidalgo: I think most of them are there. I think the only one I know that's in the States, is Joan. She lives in Exxexville.

Rubianes: I think I understand better your mother's anxiety about entering the convent after having such open horizons. Do you think you were searching for something more than a religious experience?

Hidalgo: I think I was searching ... I think it was the adolescent thing of wanting to leave home and become your own person. Somehow or another, I had this social sense of commitment especially to poor people because of the order that I entered, was a convent that worked with poor people in P.R. As a matter of fact, I became involved because I started working with nuns in some of the rural areas: in Monasillo, Caymito, in Puerto Rico – going to the convent. That's what led to my liking this kind of work.

Rubianes: Thinking back now with the extent of your community work, do you think you have accomplished now more than you would have in the convent?

Hidalgo: Yes, I think the convent had so many restrictions. I think I would have accomplished less... maybe not. I don't know whether more or less for the community, but certainly less in personal development.

Rubianes: So, you like the route your life has taken?

Hidalgo: Yes. This is the way I am.

Rubianes: Do you plan to live out your life in Newark? I don't mean to sound so final.

Hidalgo: Well, you know one of the things I have learned in life is you never say never. It's almost like one year at a time. I would eventually, you know, in my professional life – I would say yes, probably. When I get old enough for retirement, which is not that far away – in about ten years, I don't think I would stay here. I think I would go to Florida.

Rubianes: Why not Puerto Rico?

Hidalgo: Well, because of my two sisters – I don't have any close – my father died, two years now. And one sister lives in Florida. My other sister is planning to move to Florida, and that's where the nephews and nieces will be coming. My companion's family is made up of three aunts which are old. The youngest one is eighty-four. Her family will be, by the time we retire – our entire support system will be in Florida.

Rubianes: So, you find yourself more centered in the States?

Hidalgo: Right. I keep a place in Puerto Rico. I always go to Puerto Rico, every year. But in terms of family – you know a lot depends on your health. I mean, you never can tell if my health will hold out. It's a different ballgame if I'm sick. I mean you never know.

Rubianes: I have an idea you'll be involved in the community down in Florida.

Hidalgo: As I said, it depends on what state you're in – in a wheelchair or what have you. I mean, if I retire, I'm not going to retire to knit. I don't have any interest in knitting.

Rubianes: Well, thank you so much.